



The effect of group sandplay therapy on the social anxiety, loneliness and self-expression of migrant women in international marriages in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the number of international married couples in South Korea has been increasing and thus the related negative social phenomena, which have been observed in other multicultural societies, are also increasing. The purpose of this study was to implement group sandplay therapy on migrant women in international marriages in Korea and Verify that this intervention was effective in relieving the women's social anxiety and loneliness and improving the self-expression. The results indicated that using sandplay, women who immigrated to and live in Korea for marriage can reduce negative emotions related to anxiety and loneliness, and produce positive self-expressions, while making their own world.

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Introduction

In 2010, 13.5% of all marriages in Korea were international marriages, with 75.5% being marriages between Korean men and foreign women (Statistics Korea, 2010). Foreign women who have immigrated to Korea for marriage mostly immigrated suddenly without any knowledge of the new country or having undergone preparation processes. Although they have married foreigners mainly for economic reasons, these women can be said to represent a demographic change comparable to a new immigration (Kim, 2009; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2005; Yang & Kim, 2007). Since the characteristic of a single race has been maintained in Korea thus far, it can be said that there has been a culture among Koreans to be suspicious of foreigners. In the Korean family culture, a husband's parents have great influence, close relationships with husbands' family members are emphasized, and patriarchal customs remain. Therefore, conflicts with Korean parents-in-law or other family members give these migrant women serious difficulties.

Literature review

The studies which have analyzed the experiences of migrant women in international marriages in Korea have been usually interventions to improve their Korean language skills and also therapeutic interventions that have been usually performed in group art therapy (Jang, 2009). According to these studies, migrant

women in international marriages, due to difficulties in communication, lack of cultural understanding and cultural differences, are suffering from discrimination, frustration, anxiety (Na, 2008), hostility, a sense of alienation (Cha, 2008), loneliness and homesickness (Kim, 2009) and in severe cases, they are even abused by their husband or husband's family members (Cui, 2005; Hass, Dutton, & Orloff, 2000). Those who experience social anxiety tend to be uncomfortable in expressing themselves and thus they tend to hesitate to open up themselves to others, not to participate in social activities easily, as well as negatively perceiving others' feedback (Kim, 2009). Loneliness is an unpleasant experience that occurs when individuals' social relations networks quantitatively and qualitatively fall short of what is expected by the individuals (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978). This accurately describes the loneliness felt by migrant women in international marriages in Korea.

Sandplay therapy is an intervention method that can help those with anxiety, loneliness, or difficulties in self-expression (Jang, 2009) by making safe and protected, symbolic spaces (Kalff, 1980/2003) because it is a therapeutic modality that does not impose the burden of linguistic interaction and enables non-linguistic communication with images in sandtrays, stories, expressions, and gestures, as well as enabling self-expression with a medium called sand which is familiar to everybody (Hwang, 2007; Jang, 2009).

Symbols tend to bring shapes to chaos (Briggs, 1992). Conflict problems experienced by humans can be internally integrated through the collective unconscious that appears in the form of symbols, in particular by self-energy and internal integration and adaptation that promotes external adaptation (Edinger, 1972; Jung, 1954/2002). According to Weinrib (1983), the creation of a sand

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picture is a “symbolic and creative act that can stimulate the imagination, free neurotically fixated energy, and move it into creative channels, which in itself can be healing” (p. 23). Group therapy makes individuals experience communication among group members; furthermore, being contained in the group, it may even affect individuals’ internal relations thereby giving opportunities for enhancing self-expression and confidence as well as positive self-experience through enhancing trust in others and a sense of belonging among members (Corey & Corey, 2006/2007).

Method

For this study, a control group pre-test/post-test design was implemented.

Participants

For this study, participants were recruited from interested women who had requested the services of the International Marriage Migrant Women Support Center for the Anyang region, where the largest numbers of migrant women in international marriages reside in Korea. The number of participants assigned to the experimental group was six, including three from China and one each from Japan, Kyrgyzstan and the Philippines, respectively. The control group included a total of five participants, including two from China, two from the Philippines and one from Vietnam. The mean age of the women in the experimental group was 35.83 years and the lengths of their residence in Korea after marriage ranged from 4 years to 11 years at the maximum and the mean length of their residence was 7.3 years. The mean age of the women in the control group was 38.60 years and the mean length of their residence in Korea was 9.4 years. As for education, 2/3 of both the experimental group and control group were high school graduates and the others were university graduates.

Procedures

The purpose, process and period of the program were concretely explained to those who wanted to participate in the program and their agreement was obtained. The participants were then assigned to the experimental group or the control group. The control group was allowed to participate in the program after the experiment and agreement to the conditions were obtained from the participants in the group. Kalfian sandplay therapy (Kalf, 2003/1980) was adopted for six of the migrant women in international marriages who had decided to participate in the program once a week for 90 min per session for 10 weeks. The program was held in the International Marriage Migrant Women Support Center in Anyang.

The participants sat around a large table. First, each participant was instructed to select five figures, make a scene in a sandtray in silence and tell the emotions, physical sensations, memories and ideas she felt while she was making the sand scene. Then, two participants were paired together and one of them made a sand scene while the other one became an observer to watch the work. When all the participants had completed their scenes, the sand players told the meaning of the boxes made by them or the emotions, physical sensations, memories, and ideas that came to them while they were making the sandtrays to the group one after another and the observers also told the emotions, physical sensations, memories and ideas felt by them. Jointly made sand pictures were photographed if both the participants agreed and sand players were allowed to take photos of the sandtrays made by them if they wanted. The sessions were jointly led by two sandplay therapists. In order to analyze self-expressions, the progress of the sessions was videotaped after getting the agreement of all the participants after they were briefed about confidentiality.

Measures

The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick & Clarke, 1998) was used in order to measure the effect of the program on anxiety in social interactions among the participants. Consisting of 19 questions, this scale is a self-reporting tool to describe cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions to diverse situations that require social interactions. In this study a Korean version of the scale that was translated into Korean by Kim (2001) and studied for validation was used. For loneliness, a UCLA loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1978) translated into Korean by Kim and Kim (1989) and validated was used. To measure self-expressions, the self-expression classification scale of Chung (1986) was used which classifies linguistic expressions into positive self-expressions, positive expressions about others, negative self-expressions and negative expressions about others, and measures the frequency of each type. To measure the frequency, only those items to which all three therapists agreed were counted (Table 1).

Results

In pre-tests of ‘anxiety in social interactions’ and ‘loneliness’ conducted by Mann–Whitney U Tests as a non-parametric statistical method, there were no significant differences between the control group and the experimental group. Based on the results, Wilcoxon’s Rank Sum-tests were conducted for differences between scores before and after the program in each group. The results from the experimental group showed significant differences between pre-tests and post-tests in both variables; ‘anxiety in social interactions’ ($Z = -2.207, p < 0.05$) and ‘loneliness’

Table 1
Self-expression observation items.

Positive expression	Self	Positive expressions about oneself (happiness, vivacious, exultant, pleasure, confidence, hope, thanks, satisfaction) Reactions to accept one’s own emotions (comfort, take care of oneself, precious, look warm, accept, cause smiles) Indirect positive expressions (will improve, will get better, not hard, try to be dignified, was changed)
	Others	Positive expressions about others (concern, sympathy, thanks, respect, care, affection) Expressions to encourage things done by others (harmonized, good job, look good, thanks for the efforts, helpful) Reactions to accept and understand (that could be so, I understand)
Negative expression	Self	Hostile expressions about oneself (self criticism, sense of worthlessness, pointing out mistakes or faults, regret) Negative expressions about oneself (depression, anger, nervousness, fuggy, tired, impatient, irritation, anxiety, sorrow, solitude, frustration, loneliness) Reactions to report physical inconvenience (headache, insomnia, etc.)
	Others	Direct aggressive expressions about others (criticism, anger, opposition, neglect, hatred, jealousy, competition, distrust)
		Indirect aggressive expressions about others (bother, fear, burdensome, worried) Reactions to avoid others’ attacks (suppress, disregard, feel out of place) Hostile expressions about situations (not humans) (embarrassment, ridiculous, fearful, irritated, anger, frustration)

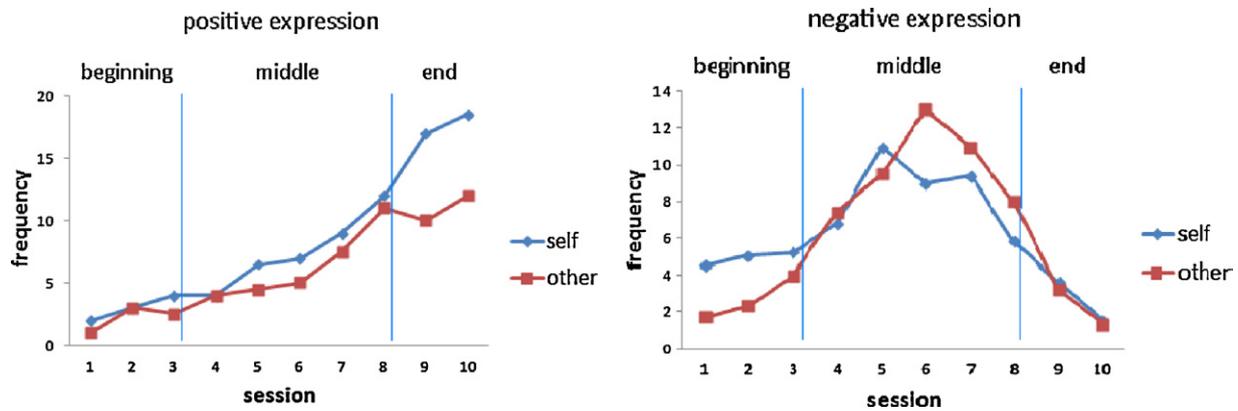


Fig. 1. Means of positive/negative linguistic expressions in the entire participants.

($Z = -2.201, p < 0.05$). In the case of self-expressions, both 'positive self-expressions' and 'positive expressions about others' showed continuous increases in frequency from the first session to the last session in all participants (average numbers of times of expressions in the first session; self 1.7 times, others 1 time, average numbers of times of expressions in the 10 sessions; self 17 times, others 19 times). Negative self-expressions and negative expressions about others showed a tendency where the frequency increased in all participants until the mid session and decreased thereafter in all participants (Fig. 1).

Discussion

It can be seen that after the participation in group sandplay therapy, anxiety in social interactions and loneliness significantly decreased statistically. In the case of anxiety in social interactions the mean score decreased considerably from 39.5 in pre-tests to 22 in post-tests, and in the case of loneliness the scores decreased from 49 in the pre-tests to 35.83 in the post-tests. The participants were stimulated to project their emotions from experiences related to the anxiety or loneliness they were experiencing in their life while they were making scenes in the sand trays. Through doing this it seemed that they could identify their emotions through sand pictures and could connect the scenes in sand trays and their emotions and experiences with the symbols projected in the sand trays while sharing their stories with group members. In this process, they felt that the difficulties experienced by them were not unique to them but common to most participants. The attitude of the therapists who listened to their stories without any judgment made other members listen to the stories with the same attitude and it seems that this attitude also encouraged them to open themselves. It seems that, in this process, they practiced social interactions and the practice reduced their anxiety. The support and sympathy received from the therapists and group members reduced their loneliness.

This result can be also seen in the self-expressions of the participants. Interestingly, it can be seen that negative self-expressions and negative expressions about others showed increasing frequencies until the midterm and showed decreasing frequencies thereafter without exception. It can be seen that, as they experienced support and acceptance from the group leaders and members, they poured out negative emotions about themselves and others and the necessity of negative expressions gradually decreased as they experienced sufficient support and acceptance. This is a process that typically appears in the course of psychotherapy. In a study by Ahn (2005), although there were not so many negative expressions in the initial session because clients either

"focused on superficial events only" or "tried to show good shapes only", later they could express negative emotions that had been suppressed, passively expressed or hidden thanks to the therapist's sympathetic attitude, safe atmosphere, non-critical and accepting attitudes and objective explanations of situations. After these expressions, they began to have positive attitudes toward themselves and thus positive expressions increased. It seems that these clients who could not produce self-expressions due to anxiety in social interactions and loneliness while having negative images about themselves and others improved by sufficiently expressing their inner side through sand scenes and being supported in the process of converting the scenes into language.

In relation to the aforementioned results, as for sand pictures at the beginning, the participants left many empty spaces, used only part of spaces, showed figures without any relationship with each other, had difficulties in making sand scenes or changed the positions many times. However, as the sessions passed the midterm and progressed toward the end stage, there was a tendency for the arrangement of figures or forms to move toward the center, show relationships between figures or family relationships and the participants firmly selected the locations of figures. In particular, in the last session, all the participants expressed positive emotions and scenes such as love between a mother duck and its ducklings, happy families, parties, safe homes, roads to go back home, their houses in the future, angels that guarded the home, family outings and well-grown sons, thereby showing transformation themes in Kalfjian (2003/1980) sandplay therapy such as positive transformation, the possibility of changes, and mother-child unity, which are a basis necessary for the development of relationships and consciousness. The participants voluntarily expressed that their participation in the sandplay therapy program made them have such emotions. To maintain their changes, they voluntarily formed a support group which was a social network for them even after the 10 sessions were completed and thus all the processes were finished.

Overall this study supports the fact that group sandplay therapy is helpful for migrant women in international marriages in Korea as a means of improving the positive self-expression of themselves and others, and reducing negative emotions related to anxiety and loneliness, while making their world during sand play. Additionally, the therapeutic benefit of group sand play therapy implemented in this study shows an avenue that can be used to make a support group for these women.

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